

TOIL, TILL AND TEND YOUR GARDEN

Composting will boost your soil naturally

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Grab your pick-axe, shovels, trowels and gloves. It's time to plant.

But before you dig in and plant flowers and vegetables, you need to examine the most important component of gardening: your soil. Test your soil this spring and compost all year long to provide a healthy environment for your plants, recommend master gardeners Sandy Kramer and Lynda Bryant-Leibrock.

"Soil testing is the most important thing gardeners can do," said Sandy Kramer of Redford. "And adding compost will improve any soil. It's such a tremendous benefit for the soil." Kramer also works for the Wayne County Soil Conservation District, which supplies soil testing kits for Wayne County homeowners. The cost is \$12. Wayne County residents can call the district's Livonia office at (734) 625-3461.

Passing the test

Tests help indicate which nutrients may be lacking, such as nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium, and will reflect pH levels.

"That (pH) level is something that homeowners probably do not know," Kramer said. Once homeowners know this level, they can balance fertilizer doses.

Compost helps maintain balance and nutrients in the soil. Homeowners may not realize what garden treasures they are raking or mowing in their yard or grinding in the garbage disposal. Composting is an efficient recycler.

"It improves the soil structure, slows erosion, benefits the soil and reduces trash and yard waste, while improving the yields of fruits and vegetables," Bryant-Leibrock said.

When compost has completely broken down, it turns into a stable, nutrient-rich material called humus, a slowly degradable organic matter rich in nitrogen, which acts as a slow-release fertilizer.



The good earth: Finished compost was sifted to give this clean, rich compost good for potting soil.

How to compost

Start with a compost bin and grass clippings and shredded leaves, with a mix of two parts (brown) leaves and one part (green) grass. Add fruit and vegetable scraps from the kitchen and straw. Bryant-Leibrock freezes fruits and vegetables so they soften when thawed, making it easier for worms in the compost pile to eat.

Generally composting takes two to three weeks, but the process depends on how frequently the bin is turned. All compost "is compost," but the mix proportions varies the time when it will be ready for your garden, Kramer said.

Temperatures from a properly decomposing pile can reach 150-160° F. To check it for heat, place your hand over the pile. Once the pile cools, turn it.

Make sure the decomposing material stays moist. "If it does dry out, all microbial activity will stop," Kramer said.

Compost as much or as frequently as you'd like. A 50-60 percent mix with soil "is great, and even a 25-percent mix is good," Kramer said.

Homeowners with no leaves can use shredded newspapers, straw and dried grass clippings in place of the

leaves. "The best way for beginners is to layer (leaves and grass)," Kramer said.

Some gardeners worry that neighbors will complain about the compost smell. "If they mix the proper amounts of green and brown together, and keep it aerated, it will not stink," Kramer said.

Compost bins must be kept in the shade, but gardeners must not place any compost pile near trees because the tree roots will start growing toward the ground's surface. Compost piles should not be placed next to a wooded structure, like a garage. Compost will eat through wood, Kramer said.

"It's better to do in a compost bin," Kramer said. "It's neater, it's faster and it's not unsightly. For beginners, it's easier to start with a bin."

Try this for starters

The decomposition process can be enhanced with a little compost at the beginning. "It's like the baseball field in that movie (*Field of Dreams*)," Bryant-Leibrock said. "If you build it, they (those composting organisms) will come."

Gardeners also can steep the compost in a bucket with water for two days. Use this compost tea on house plants, said Bryant-Leibrock. Gardeners should be careful with seedlings as compost can burn new plants if the compost is still decomposing.

When compost decomposes, the mix can make humans and animals ill if it is accidentally ingested. "Always wear gloves when working

with it," Bryant-Leibrock said. Keep children and pets away from it. No meat scraps or bones should be placed in compost bin, nor oils or cat or dog manure.

Homeowners who don't compost but have tested their soil and need to adjust the mix can tweak it, using a few "mini-composting" tips.

Tips

Eggshells add calcium to gardens. Coffee grounds contain nitrogen and can add to the soil (great for roses) while the coffee filter adds carbon.

If you do fertilize, use organic fertilizers and slow release fertilizers (5-5-5 or 5-10-5) before planting.

Clay soil is difficult to work with, and a problem some first-time gardeners face. "Every time you till it, you just make the particles smaller," Kramer said. That makes the clay pack more readily and renders it even more difficult to work with.

"And if you mix sand in it, you make cement," Kramer said. "Clay soil has the smallest particles and it packs so tight."

Use a pitchfork and just turn the soil and compost in, Kramer said.

Homeowners shouldn't worry too much about getting the composting mix right the first time.

"Compost will happen. Even if you mix proportions unevenly, it will decompose eventually," Kramer said.

Your Compost Pile

What to add

- Grass clippings
- Leaves
- Vegetables and fruit
- Hay
- Pine needles
- Wood ashes

What to avoid

- Dairy products
- Bread
- Cooked food
- Dog or cat manure
- Weeds with seeds
- Coal and charcoal



Spreading it around: Lynda Bryant-Leibrock (left) and Sandy Kramer shovel out the compost.



Whoa, Nellie! Sandy Kramer prepares some soil for planting with a tiller.

Accent is on artistry for the garden

By Mary Klemic
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When it comes to your lawn and garden, the great outdoors is a great place for artistic accents.

From slender stakes that help support vines and stems, to fantastic fountains, a wide range of outdoor accessories is available for any size yard and for any personal taste. Pieces can come off a showroom floor or be custom made.

Classic look: New technology has enhanced the look of outdoor accessories, such as this fountain and the birdbath at right, both from Décor Statuette in Sterling Heights.



"The garden has become an actual living space," said Robin Blitchok, who with her husband, Marvin, is owner and designer of the family's business, Marvin's Garden in Fenton. "People can look at it as a living room."

"Even condos have little courtyards," said Mike Blondo, owner of Décor Statuette Inc., 43756 Mound in Sterling Heights.

In its 35 years of business, Décor Statuette has seen many changes in outdoor accessories. New molds and technology have enhanced both familiar and new styles.

"The pieces have become better detailed," Blondo said. "There's a larger variety of items."

Fountains, wind chimes (all sizes), balustrades and angel statues are popular today, he said. As an example of the improved detail work, the wings on an angel statue appear so feathery that you almost expect them to feel soft.

The Blitchoks began Marvin's Garden, 12272 Fenton, seven years ago. Marvin has a background in welding from General Motors. Robin always liked gardening and

art. At first designing and making the pieces from a home workshop, they participated in the Oakland County Farmers Market and eventually started the business. Today sons Sean, Jamin and Isaac also work at the shop.

Custom-made arbors and gates (both corner and entrance gates) are the most popular items, Robin Blitchok said. Favorite designs include a twig pattern on an arbor, a sunburst on a gate, and such Michigan oriented forms as a heron.

"A gate is a unique way of saying 'Come in to this private little room,'" Robin said.

She recommends having one primary focal point among your garden accents and working from there.

"Stick with the style of your home. To me, simple is better."

Garden stakes can take many shapes. The Home Accessory Warehouse, 1017 W. Maple in Walled Lake, features iron stakes topped with colorful flower forms. They are handmade with recycled materials, such as buckets, picket fences, door frames, shutters and oil cans.

Among accents at English Gardens are lanterns, sundials, and kits to make your own mosaic stepping stones.



Accent on artistry: Arbors and gates are popular garden art items for customers at Marvin's Garden in Fenton.



MARTY FIGLEY

Mass variety

This beautiful garden appeals to everyone with all its variety of flowers in bloom.

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HARRY JACHYM

Tooling around

Nail down these carpentry shortcuts and information about hammers and nails in Ask Dad. See Home Work, Page 5



HOMETOWN LIFE:

Volunteers honored:

Farmington Youth Assistance recognized 43 students recently for their myriad volunteer efforts

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